PRESENTATION: SOCIAL PEDAGOGY IN THE WORLD

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In the second decade of a new millennium, social pedagogy, both as a discipline and a practice, seems to be in good health throughout the world. One might say that in recent years we have been witnessing a revitalization of discourses and practices in relation to ways of living and relating to others in society and communities. This revitalization is due to a very complex set of causes and factors including, in all likelihood: the emergence of individualistic and consumption-based societies; the consolidation of new ways of socializing and new types of relationships through technology; the economics-driven neoliberal pressure which we as individuals, organizations and communities are subject to; and, finally, the new and very diverse forms of citizen reaction taking place in many parts of the world.

Our social world is in the spotlight; perhaps because we fear losing it or because we feel that we have already lost it (Touraine, 2013; Dubet, 2013). Or maybe because we do not really know how to deal with these new subjects - whether individual, group or community - who seem to think more about themselves, their needs and interests than about that which had been a obligatory reference for previous generations: social institutions, structure and organization.

We are interested in all that is social; we sense that in recovering or constructing that which is social we may find the answer to many of the situations and problems our societies are currently experiencing. Analytical and interpretive approaches and tools which worked in the recent past to address social issues seem to be of little use in the present because when we refer to “*social issues*”, we do not in fact know exactly what we are referring to. Perhaps it is the situation that Touraine has characterized as *the end of the social world* (2009, p. 149) that ignites or drives this desire to create or relearn what social might be or mean; a desire that is present in many of the societies on our planet.

The times we live in require us to think about how to be social beings without losing the attributes and values ​​of the individual, and vice versa. Or, in other words, how we can implement or create societies that award freedom to personal, group and community building without neglecting the bonds and interdependencies that unite us and shape us as individuals, communities and societies. How we can articulate and build bonds that do not stifle individuals’, groups’ and communities’ creativity and freedom of expression and action. How we can build relationships and communities that lead us to act and to fight for what is best for everyone because it is also, and at the same time, best for each and every one of the people that constitute this “everyone”. These are the questions which the emerging new complex social pedagogy, adjusting to the constant changes and uncertainties of life in communities and societies today, attempts to answer. And it attempts to do this by accompanying individuals, groups and communities in the process of learning about being social while they build and experience it.

In the multiple methodological, professional and occupational forms in which it can be embodied, social pedagogy today appears as an emerging, innovative, relevant and very promising field to respond to new situations and problems occurring in the different communities and societies on our planet. Although the international community of scholars is still quite scattered in the field of social pedagogy there are increasingly signs of international interaction. Compilations introducing the diversity of country-specific traditions, policies and practices of social pedagogy have been published (e.g. Kornbeck & Rosendal Jensen 2009) as well as collections of literature addressing to the nature, history, theory and practice of social pedagogy (e.g. Hämäläinen & Nivala 2015).

Since its birth in Germany a little over a century and a half ago, social pedagogy has followed an uneven path in that country as both a discipline and professional practice, appearing and disappearing with the different political regimes. It soon spread and established itself in the Nordic countries and southern Europe. The social pedagogy of Northern Europe amalgamated the so-called “*continental tradition*”, pedagogical and community-based, with the “*American tradition*”, based on education and social work (Eriksson & Markström, 2003). Meanwhile, in the second half of the last century, Spanish social pedagogy began a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas and practices with what is known as “*popular education*”, arriving from Latin America through the ideas of Freire (Úcar, 2012).

One of the factors that has likely contributed most to the modernization of social pedagogy has been the extensive development it has undergone since the beginning of the new millennium in the English-speaking and Latin American spheres. In the former, the academic literature no longer questions, as was customary in the first decade of the millennium, the possibilities of importing the socio-educational intervention model of social pedagogy to the context of residential care centres for children and young people in the UK (Cameron & Moss, 2011). Today, the possibilities offered by this model are clearly acknowledged (Hatton, 2013).

In Latin America, meanwhile, via this close dialogue with popular education social pedagogy is now being extensively developed in both the theoretical and professional spheres, as evidenced by the numbers of conferences and publications in these first years of the new millennium.

This issue of our journal, which celebrates its 30 years of existence, is intended to provide a snapshot of the current state of social pedagogy in the world. We have therefore requested contributions from academics and practitioners worldwide.

The articles from Denmark, Finland and Sweden show that the development of social pedagogy in these Nordic countries is significantly influenced by the German tradition and, in addition, by the Romance tradition of social pedagogy, Paulo Freire’s thought in particular. The Nordic articles point out the importance of theory-building to the development of social pedagogy as a discipline and professional practice. Although there are many similarities in the Nordic welfare systems and societies in general, the articles show that the position of social pedagogy as discipline and fields of practice is in many ways different between individual countries. However, there are also many common elements.

In the Nordic countries, in accordance with the German emphasis, social pedagogy has been mostly interpreted in terms of educational activity dealing with the discrepancy between individual and society. The ideas of community development and communal nature of educational work have played an important role therein. These can be defined as key elements of the conception of social pedagogy in Denmark, Finland and Sweden.

The article on Finland and Sweden, is based on comparative analysis considering main similarities and differences in social pedagogical activities between these two countries. The article generalizes that, in spite of many common theoretical starting points, the Finnish concept of social pedagogy is more focused on history of ideas and theory-building of social pedagogy while the Swedish tradition deals more with practice issues. A special challenge in Finland is to develop social pedagogical expertise as professional activity for practice and gain acknowledgement in different practice fields while in Sweden the challenge is to strengthen social pedagogy as an academic discipline and expertise.

In fact both countries face these both types of challenges but they are emphasized in different ways. Also the Danish paper points out convincingly the importance of theory-building and research to the development of social pedagogy as a functional system of professional activities in the modern information society and introduces this as main challenge of the Danish social pedagogy. In Denmark, unlike in Finland and Sweden, there are institutions attributed as ‘social pedagogical’ institutions.

The article from Spain reflects on the current state of affairs regarding social pedagogy in the country, with the aim of identifying its weaknesses, strengths, threats and opportunities. The analysis focuses on the review of social pedagogy as a key discipline in reconstructing the educational sciences and as a response from social education to the demands and needs of society and the welfare state. The analysis of the situation is complemented by research focused on social education studies.

The Russian article provides a fine example of the fact that national traditions of social pedagogy are substantially shaped by country-specific social and cultural factors. Russian tradition is, through the ages, influenced by the factors of Russian national identity, especially the Orthodox Christianity, from the pre-Soviet time up to the modern post-Soviet era. At the present time social pedagogy has achieved a firm position as an academic discipline. Also in Russia a particular challenge is to develop social pedagogy as a modern professional activity suitable to the rapidly changing and uncertain modern society.

The article from Uruguay provides the historical background of social pedagogy in that country, noting that it has only recently begun to enjoy some presence in academia and has not yet been highly developed as a discipline. The area in which there has been clear development is its professionalization, as embodied in the figure of the social educator, a professional occupation that was established in Uruguay between 1990 and 2004.

The article on Brazil takes us on a tour of Freire’s ideas and their importance to social pedagogy. It is a pedagogy that acts in all eras: past, present and future - preventing, repairing and promoting. Social pedagogy is used both in situations where there are problems or marginalization and in what might be termed normal situations.

The contribution from England highlights the novelty of social pedagogy in that country and examines the findings of ten studies that focus on training and intervention projects using social pedagogy in the context of working with children and young people in residential care (*children’s residential care, foster care and related services*).

As with the English article, the North American contribution emphasizes the lack of a previous tradition of social pedagogy in that country. From three converging traditions - indigenous education, progressive education and social movement learning – it tells the history of social pedagogy in the North American context. It is a long tradition, albeit under different names.

The article from Japan offers a versatile overview on historical development and current state of social education in the country paying attention to the position of social education in between the systems of education and welfare. From this point of view social pedagogy - introduced as social education - is viewed as an educational activity in close connection to welfare activities in communities. Co-operation between social education and welfare staffs is introduced in terms of ‘Social Education Welfare’ promoting social capital, community development, and opportunities for self-fulfilling educational activities.

In the case of South Africa, the starting point is also the lack of a social pedagogy tradition in that country. However, the authors equate the concept with popular and adult education and community development processes, based on Freire’s ideas. The text ends by asking what type of social pedagogy should be practiced in South Africa in the current context of social transformation to create more just and equitable communities.

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